DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 117 CS 503 605

AUTHOR Amor, Edward
TITLE The Playwrights-Directors Workshop.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Theatre Association (Dallas, TX, August 9-12, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Dramatics; Higher Education; *Playwriting; *Production Techniques; Program Descriptions; Theater Arts; Workshops
IDENTIFIERS *Directing (Theater); *One Act Plays

ABSTRACT

The playwrights-directors workshop at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) allows students of directing and playwriting to meet jointly to explore and solve problems in the creation and production of original one-act scripts. At the heart of the program is the belief that both playwriting and directing students profit from producing their efforts before their peers and from collaborating with each other on a production. Playwriting students are assigned to read four plays, then write a brief scene employing the style, language, and theme explored by each of the writers. The scenes are then staged by the directing students. During the latter half of the semester, the directing students stage the original one-act plays on which the playwriting students have been working during the semester. The experiment has thus far proven successful. The playwriting students have received constant attention and feedback for everything they have written in the course, with production of their final works guaranteed, and the directing students have an opportunity to receive feedback throughout the production of the plays. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED207117

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

The Playwrights-Directors Workshop

Edward Amor

I

Those of us interested in the instruction of playwriting on the college and university level are aware of the opportunities, albeit limited, which exist for what we might call more experienced playwrights to receive assistance in the development of their scripts. On the professional level, for example, numerous theatres annually solicit new plays for possible development and production. In addition, such distinguished organizations as The American Place Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, and the Playwrights Conference of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, to mention but a few, exist as developmental organizations whose stated intention it is to assist young playwrights in their artistic growth.

We would all agree that a vital component in the development of a young, or even an established playwright, is the opportunity for him or her to test a script before a selected audience, so as to determine, under favorable and controlled conditions, the play's "stageworthiness."

Unfortunately, many young as well as established playwrights, for a variety of reasons do not receive these opportunities. Often there are simply not the facilities, the time, the personnel, or the budget to enable the scripts to be performed, and so young playwrights, who as much as any other artist in the theatre need to have their work exhibited, are deprived of the important educational opportunity which the staging of their works would afford them.

I should like to address myself not to the means by which already experienced playwrights are assisted in their development, but of the way in which we at the University of Wisconsin have attempted to provide the least

CS503605

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Edward Amor
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

experienced of these writers--the student playwrights (usually undergraduates)--with opportunities to develop their writing skills from the very beginning of their writing experiences.

II

The Playwrights-Directors Workshop at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is a course in which students of directing and playwriting meet jointly to explore and solve, among other things, problems in the creation and subsequent production of original one-act scripts. During the course of the semester, playwriting students write, in addition to various specific exercises, one-act plays which are then directed, as their final project, by directing students enrolled in the course.

The course was created to meet two specific needs. The first of these, one familiar to many educators, was administrative. Although at the University of Wisconsin we offer both beginning playwriting and beginning directing classes on a regular basis (beginning playwriting once a year, beginning directing twice a year), enrollments are such that a second, more advanced course in either of the two areas cannot be guaranteed annually. To provide continued instruction in both these important areas, therefore, we devised a course in which directing and playwriting students might enroll jointly, thereby guaranteeing an annual offering of advanced projects for both groups of students.

The second, and obviously more important need, was pedagogical. Although in many departments of theatre and drama, ad hoc arrangements are made whereby directing students either occasionally, or on a more regular basis, direct the best scripts written by playwriting students in a separate course, at the University of Wisconsin we were interested in providing an opportunity for

young writers to be guaranteed production of their works both during the writing of, and immediately upon completion of their scripts. We were interested particularly in establishing a systematic process in which we could truly test, through performance and immediate critical evaluation, works "in progress."

At the heart of our philosophy was our belief that, as in related artistic fields, both playwriting and directing students profit not only from the rewards which accrue from interaction with fellow students, but especially from experiencing the production of their efforts before their peers. Some of us have long believed, in addition, that students of directing should have as a required component of their educational experience, the responsibility of mounting a "new script," with the playwright present during the production, and similarly that playwriting students could also profit not only from seeing their plays performed as they are being written, but also from the experience of working at the same time with a young directing student. Indeed, at the University of Wisconsin, as elsewhere, it is a common practice to have some productions managed exclusively by students, with the faculty acting in only supervisory capacities.

The workshop differs in yet another important way from our regularly scheduled playwriting class. Whereas in the first semester course, scripts, as they are written, are read to the class by the Instructor, here all scripts and all exercises are performed instead. At every stage of their development, therefore, the playwriting students 1) see their work performed by the directing students, 2) receive oral critiques in class from the Instructor, the directing students and other playwriting students, and 3) receive written criticism from the Instructor. All "feedback" is immediate.

As the directing students in this course have already completed at least one course in directing, and are in addition usually graduate MFA degree candidates in directing, who are not yet ready to direct their thesis productions, we feel that the playwriting students receive the best instruction and assistance we can afford them, consistent of course, with their degree of development and achievement.

III

At present, the course is structured to meet regularly twice weekly in two- to three-hour blocks. A third period, a laboratory, is scheduled as needed. The first meeting each week is attended by all students enrolled in the course. The second, in which only directing problems are discussed, is required of only the directing students, although playwriting students are invited to attend, and in fact, do so on a regular basis. During the laboratory period, usually held on Fridays, projects are performed. Final projects are always performed at least twice, and are open to all interested persons.

The playwriting component of the workshop is divided into three five-week periods. At the end of the semester, (i.e. during the third five-week period), we are concerned with the final stages of the mounting of the one-act plays. During the middle five-week period, we are concerned with the development of those plays. During the first five-week period of the class, the primary emphasis falls on the preparation of certain exercises which we believe, assist both playwrights and directors in their development as student-artists. It is this process of development that I now wish to discuss.

IV

In the early years, when the course was first offered, it became apparent

to us that student playwrights required more attention than they were then receiving. Although some elements of composition, plot, character, theme, etc., could be discussed in class, we soon found that a simple reading of scenes from their plays proved insufficient to meet completely the needs of either the playwriting students, or certainly, of the directing students. As a result, two changes were made in our syllabus at that time. First, as we have mentioned, instead of having the Instructor read the playwrights' materials, the directing students were obligated to stage them. Second, after considerable search, we decided to add to the early portion of the semester, a component which would enable not only the playwrights to develop their writing skills further, but also the directing students to direct projects from the outset of the semester, while at the same time becoming familiar with the work of the student playwrights.

We are all, of course, aware of the frequent criticism that theatre students, and especially young writers, do not read enough drama. Indeed, we often find ourselves complaining that when they do read, they do not pay sufficient attention to the texts. As the playwriting students were not required to complete their final one-act scripts until approximately five weeks before the end of the semester, and as they had already been exposed, in the first semester, to a series of basic exercises dealing with problems of plot, character, theme, exposition, complication, suspense, language, etc., we determined to develop a series of exercises which required them not only to read critically, but also to write exercises which would enable them to grow as student-artists, and also to provide the directing students with early directing opportunities.

At the beginning of the semester, therefore, four plays were assigned

for reading by all students. They were: Clifford Odets' WAITING FOR LEFTY, George Kelly's POOR AUBREY, Tennessee Williams' PORTRAIT OF A MADONNA, and Eugene O'Neill's IN THE ZONE, all significant one-act plays by major American writers.

The first assignment given to the playwriting students, then, was to write a brief scene employing the style, language and theme explored by Odets in WAITING FOR LEFTY. The assignment further required that the scene be capable of being inserted into WAITING FOR LEFTY, a play which consists of a series of short scenes designed to build toward a specific climax, in this case the calling for a strike. The students were instructed, therefore, to write a scene which would serve the same general function as the other scenes in the play, without causing any disruption to its theme, plot or style.

To assist the playwrights in their task, we first discussed the play itself, and under the direction of one of the directing students, performed in class the "Joe-Edna" scene from Odets' play. The playwriting students then wrote their scenes and submitted them. The scenes were then given to the directing students, who performed them in a subsequent class meeting. These performances consisted, of necessity, of staged readings--script in hand--but were otherwise carefully rehearsed.

Following the performance of the scripts, a discussion was held in the class as to the merits of the students' scripts, as well as to their fidelity to the Odets script, and to the skill of their direction.

It may be argued here that having students adhere this closely in their writing to the style of a major playwright might cause them to become imitative and, perhaps, inhibit, rather than forward their own development.

We do not believe this to be the case. This exercise, we believe, had

several benefits. First it required all students to pay strict attention to Odets' text. Playwrights could hardly discuss their own exercises, based on Odets' work, without being familiar with Odets' own craftsmanship. Directing students could hardly evaluate their scenes in relation to Odets' without understanding the source. Secondly, the exercise allowed students considerable freedom with plot and character.

But even if the students had only imitated their source, we felt that there was merit in such a process. One need only examing the teaching methodology in the area of painting, where students are often required to copy literally works by masters so as to learn certain lessons in composition and technique, to discover valuable parallels. Indeed, musical composers often acknowledge their borrowing of styles employed by other composers. Experience in the area of scene design , where students are assigned the designing of a play in the style of a specific painter, has also proven this method to be of considerable value.

We began our series of exercises with WAITING FOR LEFTY partly because its form allowed for the writing of an independent, but related episode with beginning, middle and end, but also because it contained a clear political, social and economic statement, with characters of rather precise definition, whose dilemma we felt was accessible to young writers.

The second assignment consisted of the writing and performing of a scene which might have occurred between the characters Amy and Aubrey in George Kelly's POOR AUBREY. Specifically the students were requested to write a scene dealing with a proposal of marriage by Aubrey to Amy, a scene which does not exist in this play or in Kelly's other treatment of these characters in THE SHOW OFF. Unlike the first assignment, where no characters were pro-

vided the student playwrights (and therefore they could invent within limits their own plots and characters--so long as they dealt with inequities in the socio-political-economic system of the 1930's--), now they were obligated to remain faithful to Kelly's characters whose traits were already established for them. Obviously the exercise required them now to analyze character further, and to be prepared to defend their choices in the scenes they had written, not only from the dramaturgical point of view, but also in terms of the fidelity of their characters to the originals. A critique, as usual, followed the performance of these exercises.

The third assignment was one relating to Tennessee Williams' PORTRAIT OF A MADONNA. Attention was now turned to a new, specific style, that of poetic realism, one somewhat more difficult for some young writers. Their assignment this time was to write and perform a scene between Lucretia Collins and Richard, the young man whom she imagines is entering her bedroom nightly. The stipulation here was that the scene be one which had occurred before Lucretia had begun to experience her fantasies. Again these scenes were performed and criticised in class.

Finally, the fourth assignment concerned O'Neill's IN THE ZONE. Now the students were required to write the last scene to have taken place between the young alcoholic, Smitty, and Edith, the girl who renounced him, and whose letters the other members of the ship ultimately discover and read.

V

It can be seen that these four assignments (and there are obviously others which could be substituted for them),were intended to offer students the experience of analyzing, writing and directing works based on the plays of four very varied and successful playwrights (each requiring a different

style of writing), while at the same time offering models for the student playwrights' own development.

These assignments accounted for the first five weeks of the semester. Meanwhile the playwriting students were also required to initiate and develop their final one-act play scripts. In weeks six through ten, therefore, the directing students turned their attentions to rehearsing the materials the playwriting students were developing for their final one-act scripts. As soon as two or three pages of dialogue appeared, for example, the directing students would rehearse them "as it" out of class and perform them for the entire class. Discussions of the works in progress would follow. The playwright, having heard his lines performed, would be free at any time to rewrite them, if so desired, or change the substance of the script in whatever way he or she wished. Much like music students who are able to sit at the piano, for example, testing compositions as they create them, the playwriting students had the opportunity to respond to their texts at once, hearing the rhythms, choice of language, "speakability" of the lines, and to examine character, plot, etc. As always, criticism of the text was offered following every reading, as well as criticism of the staging of the scenes.

Interestingly, the students were almost never self-conscious about seeing their unfinished works read in this fashion. In fact they always grew to welcome them, and be open to discussion, owing in part to the genial nature of the discussions and the excellent criticism offered by their fellow students in analyzing their works.

Upon completion of the scripts, the directors cast the plays from the pool of student actors available in the Department, and were assigned both a lighting student and a student stage manager to assist in the production

of the plays. Incidentally, all plays written by playwriting students in these classes are performed at the end of the semester.

Two weeks prior to the final performances (i.e. the ones for a public audience), the cast of the play and the director were required to perform a "read-through" of the text during class time, as a final pre-performance test of the scripts, and of the path its direction was taking. Often, this read-through afforded an opportunity to correct errors in the writing or the direction of the work, while time remained for revisions.

The performances themselves occurred in the laboratory theatre classroom, with modular settings provided, as well as modest, but adequate lighting effects. Following the performance, critiques were held. Formal criticism for each play was held during regular class time, with all members of the class present. A final written critique was provided by the Instructor.

A work might now be said regarding the section we have not discussed, that devoted exclusively to the directing students. I have not included a discussion of the exercises required in this companion session, as I have been concerned primarily here with discussing the playwriting component. Suffice it to say that the directing students were provided with a series of independent exercises, designed to assist them in the development of their directing skills.

VI

Although the requirements for the course may appear at first glance to be large, actually the work load experienced by the students was no greater than they would have encountered under other normal circumstances. Neither playwriting nor directing students appeared unduly pressured.

For those who feel that the Instructor's assignment was prohibitive, we

can assure you that although the demands were large, they were nonetheless manageable. The course has the advantage of being capable of being reproduced in a number of academic settings, if not annually, then perhaps biannually. In some schools where the same faculty member does not teach both directing and playwriting, as in the case of this writer, certainly an equitable means could be found in which instructors might be willing to alternate offering their time free, so as not unduly to burden either professor.

VII

In all, the experiment appears thus far to have proven successful. The playwriting students have received constant attention and feedback for everything they have written in the course, with production of their final works guaranteed. If they have had to write their plays in somewhat less time than usual (owing to the deadline which is required in order to allow directing students time to cast and produce the plays), the burden does not appear to have caused major problems.

We might add that all final projects are regarded as "works in progress," and no student views the final project as the final statement of his or her play. This is an important consideration, for we do not wish to have students feel that there is no room for improvement, or that the work must be in a finished state in order to be produced. We perform "as is," and hope that the student will continue to develop the work as well as grow as a student-artist following the completion of the course.

Edward Amor
ATA CONVENTION
Dallas, Texas
August 10, 1981